**To what extent was the success of the Conservatives in maintaining themselves in power from 1951 to 1964 the result of weakness in the labour party?**

The reasons for the success of any political party are normally many and varied. That said, any party that can maintain power for extended periods in British politics must give thanks to one or two main long running factors. Often this factor is the weakness of the opposition party, or the state of the economy.

If we consider the 1951 election, which removed the Labour government under Attlee and brought back Churchill’s ‘government of nostalgia’, it is clear to see that the cause of Labours fall from power was due to divisions within the party (some due to spending cuts and austerity measures brought in to combat a dipping economy). The Bevanite rebellion in 1950 by the far left of the Labour party tore the party to pieces and resulted in a tiny margin of victory in that year’s election. The divisions in the party worsened still into 1951, with infighting due to Britain’s entry into the Korean War and the continuation of rationing and austerity measures, making it easy for the Conservatives to swoop in and take control (albeit by a small margin of votes) in 1951. Thus, the Conservatives achieved power in 1951 not by offering the people inspirational policies or security, but because the Labour Party was too weak and divided to offer anything better to the British people.

The weakness that led to the 1951 loss for the Labour Party did not disappear. The Labour party was plagued by division well into the mid-sixties; most of the way through the fifties they were too busy fighting with themselves (mainly about how far left the party should be, with Bevan pushing ever left and Gaitskell trying to rein his party towards the centre) and attacking US ‘imperialism’ and nuclear armament to lead a functional opposition. Perhaps the greatest weakness that the Labour Party had, however, throughout this time was their inability to capitalise on any Conservative slip-ups. They failed miserably to use the fiasco of the Suez affair of 1956 in the 1959 election, even though it would have been a prime time to bring out and attack the closed door dealings of Eden’s Conservative government. The Labour party also struggled to find an independent, and more importantly electable, voice when in opposition. This was in part due to the consensus style politics of the time, which made it hard for Labour to offer anything genuinely fresh and attractive to the populace. This can be seen when considering the Labour Party’s attitude to the EEC, which was rather regressive.

Weakness, however, are only weakness when compared to strength. It is true to say that almost all the Conservative administrations that held government in this period did show strengths in various areas. One has these areas has already been hinted at; the Conservative leaders (Churchill, Eden and Macmillan) had all served in the coalition government in the Second World War and had all fought for their country in the First World War. They therefore rode on a wave of positive nostalgia; if Churchill could beat Hitler after all, then what was to stop him resolving the economic woes and austerity that had been a key feature of the Attlee government? Nostalgia would, of course, disappear quickly if it wasn’t backed up by good policies. The Conservative administrations of the time, however, were adept at the art of budget politics and policies that gained public support. The Conservatives pleased the people in several ways, ranging from keeping the popular Labour policies of the welfare state to out doing the old Labour policies (for example in housing, where the Conservatives pledged to build 300,000 houses per year, out doing Labours promise).

The Conservatives also knew how to please the people when it came to economic policies. Their tactic of ‘stop-go’ (responding to the economic situation, rather than controlling it), whilst not being in any way sound or safe long term, certainly made the people feel richer as there was huge availability of cheap credit.. A government that made the average person richer, or at least appeared to, was unlikely to be unelected. This policy was hugely irresponsible long term, as it led to stagflation. Not that that mattered during this period, as the bubble had yet to burst, and the people were happy to live the richer, happier lie. It cannot be said that the Conservatives maintained power throughout this period due to good managing of the economy that made the average man richer, but it could perhaps be said that they maintained power during this period because they were good at handling events in the economy to make them look like the bringers of wealth.

This idea of ‘spin’ was certainly one of the greatest strengths of the conservatives during the fifties. Whilst leaders such as Churchill benefited from their heroic image from the wars, later leaders, such as Macmillan, were media savvy. This was especially true of Macmillan of TV. The conservatives quickly dominated this avenue of advertisement, and by using polling data they were able to offer policies that were wanted at the right time and in the right places. This can be seen in the 1951 election, where the Conservatives actually got fewer votes, but gained more seats, as they had campaigned in a very tactical manner. Macmillan’s administration practically invented the modern political sound byte, and was even skilled enough to use the US president Eisenhower to fix the negative feelings about the Suez affair. The fact that the Conservatives reversed many of the negative feelings that the British people had towards them after Suez is a testament to the skill of their political propaganda, and the leadership and character of Macmillan.

The choice of the men who ran for Conservative PM during this time was also a factor to why they maintained power. Churchill was a national figurehead, Eden was believable and appeared honest and Macmillan was suave and charming, both in public and when doing politics. The latter of these men was considered by many to be the ‘perfect Edwardian gentleman’, and he certainly knew how to charm his way into British hearts. That said, the Conservatives were not without fault, and there were certainly other reasons for why they were able to maintain power in this era.

Many of the Conservative policies were actually rather bad, when viewed long term and through the mindset of conventional economics. It was only because the economy was growing that many of their policies appeared to work. The campaign of the 1959 election for the Conservatives was based on the idea that the British public had ‘Never had it so good’; the Conservatives won the election on the idea that they had brought wealth to the British people, but really all they had taken the credit during economic boom years. This can be shown by the fact that successive Conservatives from 1951 onwards failed to invest in infrastructure, business and industry. Their policies of acquiescence to the demands of the trade unions aided the economic bubble to grow and grow beyond sustainable levels by allowing ever increasing pay rises with equal increases in output. The subsequent inflation and stalling economic growth (in part due to Macmillan’s failure with the EEC) lead to a failing economy going into the sixties and was one of the causes of the Conservatives fall of power in 1964. From this, it would be fair to claim that the reason that the Conservatives maintained power during this period was because the growing economy allowed them to, as it is true that as soon as the economy began to fall so did Conservative popularity.

The point mentioned above offers factors to explain the Conservatives ability to maintain power by considering the conditions in which the Conservatives fell out of power. The same reasoning can be applied to the social reasons why the Conservatives maintained power. Throughout the early fifties society had remained very similar to what it had been before the war; people were still divided by class, Britain was almost all white and there were no teenagers. This society suited a Conservative government, and the rich upper classes thoroughly opposed the socialist ideas of Labour. This style of society was one of the reasons the Conservatives maintained power. By the late fifties, and early sixties, society was hugely different.

This new society was born out of the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1948, which allowed any commonwealth citizen (all 800 million of them) automatic citizenship in the UK, the removal of National service in 1959 and the increased affluence (and thus buying power) of the young. The last two of these resulted in the development of a youth culture in Britain. The evolution from almost Victorian society to modern society in barely a decade shocked many in power; suddenly antiestablishment ideas were quite the rage and the Conservatives, with their very Etonian style, we the obvious establishment. With their austere, respectful and aged form they appeared hugely contrasting to the loud, angry and rebellious Mods, Teddy Boys and Rockers. The youth couldn’t understand their leaders, as this was the first generation not to have grown up properly during the war or economic woes. This lack of understanding to their leaders quickly turned to lack of respect, in part due to the wildfire that was satirical comedy and the various scandals that it fed off. Whether it was the sex scandals of Profumo, the ‘revealing’ photos of the Duchess of Argyll and certain MPs (together), or the spy scandals of Vassal and Philby, it all taught the population that the Conservatives were not to be taken seriously as leaders. The embarrassments of these scandals also lead to many senior Conservatives resignations, leaving their party missing key minds and ideas. In many ways these social changes, linked with the scandals that came into the light were one of the key reasons why the Conservative government lost the respect of the populace in the early sixties, and thus their votes. It would seem then that the reason that the Conservatives maintained power during this period because society at that time was well suited to a Conservat6ive ruling elite.

There was also quite a lot of luck involved in this maintenance of power. Gaitskell, a key labour opposition member and a good contender for PM, came to power to compete the place in 1959, a time of a growing economy and greater affluence. It is most probably that if the economy had been stalled at the time then he would have won. The Attlee government also suffered from the curse of ‘events’, as it took most of the blame for the Korean War, despite the fact that it was UN force. These may have been minor details, but in close run elections, they meant a lot and were not easily forgotten.

In conclusion, the ability of the Conservatives to maintain power between 1951 and 1964 was due to several key factors. The fact that the Labour party was in disarray for the majority of this time was important, but not key. The reasons they held power was because they were able to ride a wave of economic growth very well, taking the credit of it without having to actually do the work. This is clearly evident in their policies of ‘Stop-Go’ and budget politics. The shape and form of society during this time was also helpful for the Conservatives to kept in power, as people were happy not to question and peer into the sometimes dark dealings and actions of their government. The scandals of the early sixties were almost certainly not their first of their kind, but society had changed to a point where these scandals could no longer be brushed under a rug. The fact that the leaders of the Conservatives (Home excluded) appeared trustworthy and respectable also helped them hold to power. It was, however, most probably due to the ability of the conservatives to please the people that resulted in them maintaining power. Through ‘stop-go’ economic measures they made people artificially richer and through smooth operating they managed to simply brush over negative periods such as with the Suez affair. They were not the reason why the people in this era had ‘never had it so good’, but they were able to capitalise from it in a way that their opposition could not.